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Scratching the Belly of the Beast

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Scratching the Belly of the Beast

Alan Freeman and Betty Mensch

For the animal should not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught in with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth.

—Henry Beston

The appreciation of the separate realities enjoyed by other organisms is not only no threat to our own reality, but the root of a fundamental joy.... [I]t is with this freedom from dogma, I think, that the meaning of the words "celebration of life" becomes clear.

—Barry Lopez

For five years we have been teaching about our relationship with animals and nature. This essay is the product of that enterprise, which was occasioned by our need to sort out a bizarre and contradictory experiential reality—our relationship with our dog, Bruno. For six years we lived as if in bondage to a tall, seventy-pound German short-haired pointer, bred by experts to be the perfect all-purpose hunting dog—sure of foot, keen of scent, willing to brave tangled underbrush and icy waters to retrieve its prey. The real Bruno was neurotic, cowardly, obsessive, and a constant source of household tension. At three months, however, Bruno had been a cute puppy who caught our attention as he stared out from the cramped confinement of a pet-store cage. The next day he was ours, and was to be ours for six long years.

Respectful of Bruno's noble hunting ancestry (although he himself was both gun-shy and afraid to swim), we tried to give him a chance to exert himself in wooded settings. For a time we dragged our one-year-old child out for daily dog walks after work, until Bruno caught and ate a squealing baby badger.

Bruno's enormous physical skills, out of all proportion to his sense, fueled his every move with anxiety-ridden energy. After discovering he could dig holes, for example, he transformed the small but well-landscaped backyard behind our new house into a series of deep, muddy moon craters, which he then stocked with rotting garbage. Our house had come with a fenced-in yard, but, alas, the fence stopped at four feet, which Bruno learned to take in a single bound. Within days the police arrived to tell us that "the big gray dog" had been spotted by neighbors down the street destroying their garden.

In a state of humiliation for our unneighborly behavior, we spent more than $2,000 in landscaping and fence expenses. And Bruno later managed to gore himself leaping the new pointed wood fence, leading to $800 in vet bills, along with thrice-weekly trips to the vet for most of a summer to have his surgical wounds drained.

These anecdotes merely skim the surface of Bruno reality. They leave out the fact that our six-year-old lived in constant fear during his first three years, sure that Bruno would eat him, for Bruno regularly wolfed down anything he could seize from the poor child's high-chair tray. And nothing can capture the experience of awakening to Bruno's loud whining at four in the morning, assuming he really had to go, and then discovering he just wanted to watch for the rabbit on the other side of the fence. On one such occasion, Alan punched him in the mouth, learning through extreme knuckle pain that one *never* punches a dog in the mouth.

In Buffalo, New York, where we live, more than half the children in the public schools live in poverty. Yet we spent enormous sums to maintain and accommodate Bruno. At any time we could have asked the vet to "put him to sleep," as the euphemism goes, and as the vet quite frankly suggested. But we felt we had made a commitment to Bruno. He was a fellow being whom we had taken into our home, and we experienced him as such, not just as a toy to be discarded should it cease to be amusing.

The bottom line is contradiction. Our experience of Bruno was utterly at odds with deliberate, rational analysis of our situation. In this respect, we soon discovered, we were not alone. In American culture at large, treatment of pets is riddled with contradiction. We spend $8 billion per year keeping dogs and cats, often in absurd luxury (grooming parlors, jewelry, even fur coats for some). Pet food takes up more supermarket shelf space than any other commodity, even though the

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proliferation of advertised flavors and textures does nothing to benefit animal health. What we don't wish to know, however, is how many animals suffer and die as a direct result of our pet-keeping practices. Of the 72,000 dogs and cats born daily in the United States, only one in five find a home. Shelters destroy some eighteen million unwanted animals each year, while other unwanted pets live short miserable lives scrounging for food: major cities like New York and Los Angeles have about 100,000 wild dogs each.

We abhor the eating of dogs or cats as akin to cannibalism. Shelters therefore refuse to export cat and dog bodies for use as human food, fearing public outcry, yet these same discarded bodies are regularly sent to rendering plants to be recycled into low-phosphate detergent and hog and chicken food, a practice that seems to pass as minimally acceptable.

Our culture tolerates those who lavish affection and resources on pets, but when totemistic affection is expressed through bestiality, we find the behavior despicable. Pet keeping has been called a form of petty domination, with its origins in decadent aristocratic traditions—perhaps a way of mediating our contradictory attitudes toward incest taboos, given the limited license pets provide to fondle warm, furry bodies within a familial setting. Nevertheless, these put-downs do not capture the almost magical contact that occurs when, for example, dogs are used to help emotionally disturbed children regain their connection to the world. What is the meaning of that dog-person bond? It is not universal, for the treatment of pets is as various as the cultures of the world. In some areas, dogs have traditionally been regarded as scavengers and "pestiferous vermin." This is still the case in Northern Thailand, where dogs keep the compounds clean in the absence of bathrooms. There, to eat dog is considered revolting because dogs are low creatures who eat feces. On the other hand, the West has no monopoly on affection for dogs. Early explorers in Australia found that Aborigine women nursed dingo pups along with their own infants, and the pups were lovingly raised in the household.

Our own culture's paradoxical and contradictory relationship with pets is but a subset of our relationship with animals generally. We simultaneously know and do not wish to know the truth. Animal suffering makes us anxious and uncomfortable, yet most of us want to make "rational" use of animals for our own well-being. Think about calves confined in crates in darkness, so starved for iron that they drink their own urine, so starved for maternal affection that they suck desperately at any object offered them; or caged laboratory rabbits whose eyes are doused with burning, blinding chemicals.

Eager to experience haute cuisine without cholesterol, many of us happily devour veal dishes despite the bleak, anguished experience of the calves whose flesh, we know, supplies the meat. And we regularly anoint ourselves with perfumes, powders, sprays, and ointments to enhance our capacity to attract other human animals, employing for the purpose cosmetics tested by tormenting hapless creatures.

Our children's books are filled with furry animals, whom our kids relate to as fellow beings, at least until they sit down to dine on some of them.

Although we often choose to ignore animal reality, few topics grip public attention with the force of an animal story. The single biggest media event during the 1988 presidential campaign was the dramatically depicted plight of some stranded whales off the Alaskan coast. The most sophisticated manipulators of our consumer consciousness, those who design ads for beer, know that nothing sells their product so well as dogs (or perhaps the combination of dogs and sex, which is even more curious). And our children's books are filled with furry, warm, loving animals, whom our kids relate to as fellow beings, at least until they sit down to dine on some of them.

Animal rights activists, usually dismissed by intellectuals as bourgeois sentimentalists, have recently gained surprising political clout. *Newsweek* reported in May 1988 that Congress had received more mail on the subject of animal research than on any other topic, and some university experiments have been halted as a result of public pressure. In December George Bush, embarrassed by negative coverage of his annual winter quail-hunting pageant, felt obliged to assure the people, when he later went deep-sea fishing, that he did not hurt the fish; he planned to throw them back into the ocean after catching them.

As environmental disasters (like the Alaskan oil spill, with its attendant animal suffering) multiply, even mainstream voices are recognizing that we cannot simply go on taking the natural world for granted. Today, however, we are not even close to developing an ethically coherent position on the treatment of the environment in general or of animals in particular. Ostensibly straightforward issues prove confounding. For example, the Endangered Species Act, reflecting a kind of Noah's Ark mentality, is clearly premised on the view that some economic sacrifice may be required to preserve the last members of species threatened with extinction. But the act fails

to address the fact that extinction usually results from habitat alteration. Preserving habitats is expensive, as has been the case with the vast and uncontaminated territories required by California condors or the "old-growth" forests needed by snowy owls. Suddenly our commitment to preservation becomes a commitment to "rescue" a few last survivors and place them in zoos where, we hope, they will breed. But is a condor outside its habitat really a condor, or simply an artifact preserved by people to assuage human guilt? Moreover, on exactly what basis do we give such special emphasis to the category "species," which is, after all, a human creation, manipulable in its plasticity, as interpreters of the Endangered Species Act have discovered? On what basis does a snail darter have a greater claim to our concern than a raccoon suffering in a trap or a rabbit bred to suffer in a lab?

Even when we make a commitment to preserving a natural habitat, what do we mean by "natural" in a world so changed and dominated by humans? Are fires in Yellowstone "natural"? Wild horses on the western prairies? The hunting of overpopulated deer herds?

We simply lack a vocabulary for analyzing these issues, which are ultimately ethical and theological, not just factual. In the context of human suffering caused by AIDS, the absolutism of those who oppose all animal experimentation seems callous in its indifference; yet the tremendous amount of animal suffering that we impose for trivial purposes (the testing of each new color of cosmetics, for example) may be a sign of spiritual debasement. Opponents of animal rights activists charge them with caring only about animals and having no compassion for people. These opponents remind us that Himmler was a proponent of animal rights, that Hitler was a vegetarian.

Perhaps some modern vegetarians, in their purist zeal, seek to construct a fantasy world for themselves, denying that life is rooted in suffering and death, that we are all, in the end, mere flesh. On the other hand, do we really "need" perfectly tender white veal meat, given the dismal suffering that is the price of its production? Does our insatiable desire for McDonald's hamburgers justify turning tropical rain forests into cattle-grazing pastures? At some point, does not our zeal to make productive use of nature threaten not only the future of the world's ecology, but also our own moral well-being?

If we are to take seriously the suffering and survival of animals, we must at some point confront and reject some basic presumptions of what we have inherited as secular Western Culture. These presumptions are rooted in the social moves we deploy to rationalize hierarchy and domination. These basic moves are to universalize one's particularity, to project its absence onto everyone else, and then to privilege the now universalized trait as the basis for hierarchical superiority for oneself and reductionist objectification of the Other. Through this process, dominant groups invent names for characteristics of themselves so as to celebrate their own possession of them and decry their absence in others. So named, these traits become images that take on lives of their own: the traits are implicitly universalized, and others are measured by their distance from norms now taken to be objective or natural. Thus has Western Culture identified itself as the triumph of civilization and instrumental rationality.

The English rationalized their brutal oppression of the Irish on the grounds that the latter were "heathen" and "savage," by which the English meant that the Irish were not *English,* which, by definition, meant "Christian" and "civil." Similarly, Africans were categorized as *not white,* and therefore lacking the package of cultural traits associated with whiteness. And men, having defined themselves as the embodiment of rational discourse and moral capacity, have found women by definition lacking in these traits, which means they must play dependent roles. An extreme example of absence-projection is the Freudian notion of penis envy, which, one might suggest, grew out of Freud's inability, in a cultural context of male domination, to imagine himself as a person without one.

In short, over a period of more than three hundred years a particular form of discourse, largely belonging to privileged white men, has claimed for itself the status of Universal Reason. That discourse, which may be characterized as dualistic, analytic, instrumental rationality, has become the yardstick of human hierarchy and privilege in our culture. It also has become the basis for reconceptualizing our relationship to animals and nature so as to rationalize our exploitation and domination of them.

The Western move with respect to nature has been to universalize our particular conception of rationality and then to project its absence onto the rest of creation. We define ourselves as instrumental rationalists, and on that basis we consider ourselves both different from and hierarchically superior to the rest of nature, entitled to use natural resources for our own instrumental ends.

The most rigorous justification for arrogant instrumentalism is rooted in the Western tradition of science, particularly the Baconian view of nature as an unruly force to be dominated and controlled. Often using imagery depicting man as the aggressive scientific inquirer and nature as a woman to be subdued and exploited, Bacon asserted that one could acquire true knowledge about some aspect of nature only by transforming it into an isolated, manipulable object of human scrutiny, something to be prodded and dissected in a strictly

controlled laboratory setting. This approach stands in stark contrast to that aspect of traditional, Aristotelian science that calls for observation immersed in natural context as the way to comprehend, in its totality, the essential nature of that which is observed.

The philosophical premises upon which Baconian science rests were enunciated by Descartes, with his strict dualisms of mind/matter and subject (observer)/object (observed). Within this dualistic structure, animals are relegated to the status of mere matter. They are thereby despiritualized, left without cultures or minds of their own, without thought, intention, or feeling. Like the rest of the natural world, they are readily available for instrumental human study and exploitation. In effect, the Christian presumption that only rational creatures have souls has reappeared in the form of secular rationality. As novelist Milan Kundera sums it up:

> Man is master and proprietor, says Descartes, whereas the beast is merely an automaton, an animate machine, a *machina animata.* When an animal laments, it is not a lament; it is merely the rasp of a poorly functioning mechanism.

More than three hundred years after the deaths of Descartes and Bacon, this legacy pervades the modern psychology lab, where animals, wrenched from anything resembling their natural habitats, are shocked, poked, cajoled, and otherwise "stimulated" by a variety of mechanisms, often diabolical; and students are taught never to confuse the observer and the observed by anthropomorphizing or projecting onto animals thoughts, feelings, or a social life of their own. The crucial premise is still that animals are to be regarded as mechanisms whose behavior, however complex, can be reduced to an aggregate of stimulus–response reactions governed by genetic codes.

The model epitomized by the psychology lab has sought to prove its rigor by aping the physical sciences. Ironically, however, the most rigorous physicists have been conceding the fallibility of two of their most treasured traditional presuppositions. One is the dichotomy of theory and fact, which maintains that any given explanatory hypothesis can always be objectively tested—can either be tentatively confirmed or soundly falsified by contrary evidence. As most sophisticated scientists have conceded, however, data gathering and observation are always informed and constrained by prevailing theoretical paradigms. The strict dichotomy breaks down.

So too with the dualism of subject and object. Starting with quantum mechanics and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, and continuing with philosophical counterparts such as Wittgenstein's *On Certainty,* we have come to recognize that reality makes itself known and "objective" only through the lens of the particularly situated observer. We see, as it were, always "through a glass, darkly." Instead of detachment, there can be only context.

A revisit to animal labs shows how they in fact provide a vivid example of the collapse of the observer/observed dualism. As poet, philosopher, and dog trainer Vicki Hearne points out, the presuppositions a researcher brings to the lab inevitably affect not simply the interpretation of what takes place, but also what actually happens. If a dog, who usually starts by trying to be sociable, meets with no response from the behaviorist researcher—who has been taught that animals are incapable of belief, intent, or meaning—then the dog's own capacities will be deadened and it will act as robotic as the researcher believes it to be. Since 1895, white rats have been bred specifically for laboratory use. More docile than their wild counterparts, displaying far less social behavior, and given no opportunity to develop skills necessary for life in the wild, the lab rats are, in effect, objects created expressly to meet the needs of "scientific" observers—a peculiarly artificial starting point for understanding animal behavior. Cats, by way of contrast, are difficult to "observe" because they will sometimes refuse to perform tasks they have already learned, preferring even starvation to the degradation of compliance with human demands. This extraordinary

fact has never been analyzed by behaviorists, who have no available explanatory vocabulary. Determined to Do Science rather than really understand animals, one venerable professor told a young researcher, "Don't use cats, they'll screw up your data."

Now that this rigid dichotomy separating humans from nature has started to break down, both scientists and philosophers have discovered that animals begin to *look* different: we perceive creatures unlike those we previously regarded as objectified otherness. By paying close attention, we "discover" a new animal reality. Dramatic breakthroughs have occurred in two areas: interspecies communication and the study of animal social life as "culture."

No trait has been so relentlessly universalized to privilege us in the animal kingdom as our capacity to communicate through language. Even if we don't challenge that criterion of superiority, we must recognize that experiments in interspecies communication have shown us that animals are capable of mastering language—despite refutations by behaviorists reminiscent of the Church's response to Galileo. When chimps and gorillas learned to use sign language, there was a rush to deny that this behavior went beyond mere "conditioned association." It is now clear, however, that apes can use symbols to represent things not present, and can generalize concepts (like the chimp Washoe, who learned to sign "open" for a door, and quickly made the same request for drawers, jars, and even faucets).

Facing the loss of their monopoly on "language," recalcitrant humans retreated behind the bastion of "syntax" to describe specifically human, and therefore privileged, linguistic capacity. While the debate goes on (apes may be hesitant in their syntactical ability; dolphins may be quite adept), it is clear that the former bright line between language and "nonlanguage" now eludes us: when Koko the Gorilla picks up a rubber tube and uses it as a straw for drinking while joking in signs about being an "elephant gorilla," or when Michael, now a captive gorilla, sadly describes how "bad men" came and hit his mother on the head so that blood appeared, then the syntax debate begins to look like nothing more than defensive academic quibbling.

While displays of formal linguistic skill have compelled us to reconsider assumptions about animal capacity, there is a sense in which these grammar/syntax/concept debates are simply beside the point. People have, for thousands of years, entered into complex relationships with animals, despite the absence of symbols and alphabets. The stories successful trainers tell of their horses and dogs have a moral dimension totally missing in behaviorist accounts. Implicit and explicit in the trainers' language is the notion that their animals have not only intelligence, but a complex and delicate capacity for moral understanding. When trainers start with the assumption that animals can have a responsible relationship with humans, and when they insist through discipline that the animals act accordingly, they can elicit an extraordinary degree of responsiveness, and what can rightly be called integrity. (Behaviorists, in contrast, make lousy trainers.) This reciprocal trust and shared sense of moral responsibility may constitute the real meaning of "language" between humans and animals.

While our growing awareness of animal communicative skill serves to dislodge us from hierarchical complacency, we persist in measuring animals by their distance from our still-universalized criteria of competence and moral superiority. Much more destabilizing are studies that are starting to show the rich depth of animal life in the wild. There are, it turns out, animal societies all around us about which we know almost nothing. Animals can be conscious and communicative in their own way, not ours; they can have cultures of their own, rather than just learning to participate in our culture.

In one of the great flip-arounds in the history of science, it is now argued that animals with the smallest brains are the ones who most require the capacity for conscious thought, since they are least able to contain the complex genetic material necessary to sustain a largely automatic response system. Thus the complex lives of insects have taken on new significance. One of the most successful animals in the world, for example, is the leaf-cutter ant, who performs a wide variety of tasks, including the tending of fungus gardens, while another type of ant is known to "farm" other insect species, feeding, protecting, and even building shelters for its domesticated livestock. So too, the honeybee's "waggle dance" has been called the "second most complex language we know," involving a highly stylized map of landmarks, direction, solar position, and information about the relative desirability of located substances.

Meanwhile, researchers studying mammals with highly developed social structures are starting to write in a manner more reminiscent of sensitive cultural anthropology, again destabilizing our privileged position as bearers of "culture." Their studies have brought about such a blurring of disciplinary borderlines that books about baboons, chimps, and gorillas are often shelved in the anthropology section of bookstores. The pioneer researchers, of course, were Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey; yet in some sense their chimps and gorillas were the easier cases, animals known to be evolutionarily similar to us, to be mysteriously "us" and "not us" at the same time, so that the complexity of their social

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"It would certainly influence them," he says. "Everything could be lost."

"But everything is in the basement," I say. "Everything is in that little room, where I am every day hidden from view. That's where it is, and if you forget that, there's nothing you can do for women."

"If you're not satisfied with our policy . . ." he says.

I don't hang up on him. I turn the receiver down and wait until no sounds come from it before I put it back in the cradle.

I've been fired.

JUNE 8

The rabbi comes to our loft. He has a plan:

"Your husband will be voted in as a member. Then Tuesday night the shul will vote for the first time in sixty years to give membership to women. For sure, you will be a member.

"Then, in September, you and your friends—remember Doris?—will attend a membership meeting, and you'll talk about the *mekhitza* and you'll talk in a sweet voice, like this"—his voice becomes high-pitched—"Ladies and gentlemen . . ."

"You could say that the *mekhitza* is a symbol and that it might as well be a bank of flowers. Would you agree to a bank of flowers?"

I agree, if it's not too high, too dense, if it's not the redwoods of California.

The rabbi becomes happy and begins singing a tune. *"Simkha G'dola"* he sings. "It's a new song, very big with the Hasidim." Happy Occasion.

He presses the button for the elevator, and I hear his cantorial voice as the elevator descends, *"Simkha G'dola."* □

This piece is dedicated to my father, Paul Masserman.

THE BEAST

(Continued from p. 38)

lives was not altogether surprising.

Those of us who are willing to look are now finding culture in the lives of our more distant cousins in the animal world. Elephants, for example, communicate in ways we are only starting to comprehend—not just through touching and audible trumpeting, but also through infrasonic (low-frequency) calls that carry vast distances, and by way of pheromones and vomeronasal organs, a type of perception for which we have no descriptive word even though it is characteristic of many animal species.

Elephants have a complex social structure, with female-bonded groups at the center and a multi-tiered network of relationships radiating out from them, encompassing the whole population of an area. Ritualized greeting ceremonies express and cement bonds, and vary depending on relationship and length of separation. If a close family group is separated and then reunited, the greetings will be intense and excited—the elephants will run together, rumble, trumpet, scream, click tusks together, entwine trunks, flap ears, urinate, and defecate.

There is no single uniform "elephant": a matriarch who is irritable and tends to go off on her own is unlikely to maintain a closely knit group, but when bonding is close, family affection is intense. Consider the following report by Cynthia Moss, describing what happened when poachers shot Tina, a member of an elephant group Moss had been studying:

> The other elephants crowded around, reaching for her. Her knees started to buckle and she began to go down, but Teresia got on one side of her and Trista on the other and they both leaned in and held her up. [Soon, however,] blood gushed from her mouth and with a shudder she died.
>
> Teresia and Trista became frantic and knelt down and tried to lift her up . . . and Tallulah even went off and collected a trunkful of grass and tried to stuff it into her mouth. Finally, Teresia . . . straining with all her strength . . . began to lift her. When she got to a standing position with the full weight of Tina's head and front quarters on her tusks, there was a sharp cracking sound and Teresia dropped the carcass as her right tusk fell to the ground. She had broken it a few inches from the lip well into the nerve cavity. . . .
>
> They gave up then but did not leave. They stood around Tina's carcass, touching it gently with their trunks and feet. Because it was rocky and the ground was wet, there was no loose dirt; but they tried to dig into it with their feet and trunks and when they managed to get a little earth up they sprinkled it over the body. Trista, Tia, and some of the others went off and broke branches from the surrounding low bushes and brought them back and placed them on the carcass. They remained very alert to the sounds around them and kept smelling to the west, but they would not leave Tina. By nightfall they had nearly buried her with branches and earth. They then stood vigil over her for most of the night and only as dawn was approaching did they reluctantly begin to walk away, heading back toward the safety of the park. Teresia was the last to leave. The others had crossed to the ridge and stopped and rumbled gently. Teresia stood facing them with her back to her daughter. She reached behind her and gently felt the carcass with her hind foot repeatedly. The others rumbled again and very slowly, touching

the tip of her trunk to her broken tusk, Teresia moved off to join them.

To see such animals as a "different culture" seems directly in accord with the similar deprivileging move going on in contemporary anthropology. Traditionally anthropologists shied away from an emphasis on cultural particularity, fearing excessive contextuality, cultural relativism, and the absence of fixed boundaries. They chose instead to take refuge in analytic categories ("bloodless universals"), such as religion, marriage, property, or trade, which were explicitly or implicitly applied with reference to Western norms. More recently, anthropologists have been recognizing that culture is local, plastic, and utterly particular, best understood not through abstract analytic constructs but through a process that Clifford Geertz calls "thick description." This approach necessarily leads to the rejection of standard hierarchical orderings: for example, Western "civilized culture" contrasted with "primitive culture." Thus recovery of context has a leveling effect. It means that we are all "natives" now; the world must be seen as a place where, in the words of Michael Ignatieff, "difference has its home."

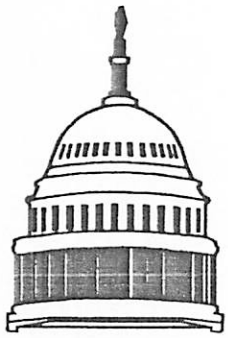
The recovery of context also means that the problem of anthropology (or ethology, or environmental ethics) is the problem of perception. How do we know the other? To deprivilege the claim that our instrumental rationality is the sole path to knowledge serves to underscore the variousness of perception itself: variety in the world is not just variety of "things out there" but variety of perceptual experience, of consciousness itself. Bees, for example, are structured so that they see broken surfaces and movement more easily than we; but they see stationary surfaces less well, and they see colors differently. What to us is a simple white flower is, to a bee, a light blue flower with shimmering, brilliant ultraviolet lines (nectar guides) pointing to the interior. Similarly, "What is it like to be a bat?" has now been posed as a serious philosophical question. Bats perceive the world through sonar: they correlate outgoing, high-frequency, subtly modulated shrieks with subsequent echoes. We can try to imagine hearing by sonar. We can also imagine, perhaps, having webbing on our arms, or flying about catching insects, or spending days lazily hanging upside down. Yet, at best, that would tell us what it would be like for one of *us* to be a bat, not what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat.

That we lack the words for a true phenomenology of bat experience is hardly surprising, since we also lack the words for a true phenomenology of the varieties of human experience. We know a great deal about human beings as objects of study; we know very little about how to get access to each other's inner lives. With respect to animals, insensitivity to the problem of perception all too easily distorts our observations. For example, as Barry Lopez points out, the male researchers who have dominated the study of wolves through field investigation have used almost paramilitary language to describe structures of hierarchy in wolf packs (where "lieutenant wolves" are "dispatched" and an individual wolf "pulls rank" on another). It is becoming evident, however, that wolf hierarchies are more fluid, shifting, and complex than once supposed. Similarly, rituals of "dominance" in baboon culture, once perceived in human terms as indicating a rigid hierarchical power structure, have now revealed themselves to be largely the behavior of insecure newcomers to an otherwise stable group. Success in dominance has, in the long run, little to do with access to material benefit.

So too our distorted perception colors our view of animal territoriality. Just as libertarian apologists for capitalism find Lockean property rights in any tribal culture that has a relationship with its things, wolf researchers have tended to see in "territory" something resembling our ownership of land, or even the boundaries between nation-states. For wolves, however, the importance of territory, the boundaries of which are not fixed but shifting, seems to lie in its relation to pack communication through scent marks. Scent marks within an area provide a kind of cognitive map for wolves, a sense of spatial organization; for by smell a wolf can tell where others in the pack have hunted successfully, or where they have traveled recently.

A somewhat different anthropomorphic tendency is to reject the mechanistic sterility of behaviorism only to adopt celebratory romanticism. We do wolves a great disservice when we describe them as embodying the true nobility we would like to find more often in human society, while we wish away aspects of wolf life that offend our liberal sensibilities. Wolves sometimes kill other wolves. They also kill young members of prey herds, not just the old and sick, with the choice of victim depending on a complex interplay of signals we cannot yet decipher. Despite the myths of environmentalists, wolves sometimes kill beyond their needs, and probably have killed unarmed people during periods of leanness, when taking human prey was worth the risk. The process of hunting is not especially attractive, for wolves run their prey to the point of bloody exhaustion, ripping at the flanks and abdomen, tearing at the nose and head. When the prey is lying on the ground, the wolves will bite open the abdominal cavity and start eating, sometimes before the animal is dead.

Romanticism carries risks far graver than an occasional pretty fantasy about the natural nobility of animals. The grotesque racism of the Nazis was part of a more



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THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JULY 23, 1989

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general ideology that celebrated a spiritualized conception of nature. Early versions of Nazi anti-Semitism were based specifically on the fact that Jews, as city dwellers, had never been part of the rural German *Volk* tradition of closeness to natural forces. Early nazism represented a rejection of academic scientific rationalism, along with modern technology, and a quest for a more authentic spiritual connection to the natural world. In its most virulent form this ideology became the romanticization of precisely those aspects of nature with which liberals are least comfortable—nature's inexorable indifference to individual suffering, the genetic elimination of the least fit in favor of the strongest, and the seeming irrelevance of the "self" in the grand natural order of things.

The Greens, who in Germany today are trying to fashion a politics rooted in a more sensitive concern for the environment, are themselves plagued by the shadow of nazism. The challenge is to understand nature from a more ethically sensitive perspective than instrumental rationality offers, yet to do so without falling into the trap of romanticism. That challenge, in turn, has everything to do with the limits and possibilities of perception.

Other cultures may at least offer some guidance. With respect to wolves, for example, many Western scientists who, rightly, want to really *know* about wolves, to know their reality rather than some romantic image of them, go about their task with a peculiarly aggressive spirit, as if with enough radio collars and microscopes one could bind up the wolf in great lengths of statistical data. While much of that data is useful and informative, Western scientists still know less about wolves than do the Nunamiut people, who, living a hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle, share their lives with wolves. Both the Nunamiut and the wolves must depend on similar hunting techniques to survive, and both have learned to perceive the world in the same way, noting details and making sensory discriminations that would completely elude a Westerner. The Nunamiut, in other words, live in the same "time space" as wolves, and it is different from ours.

Although the Nunamiut's knowledge of wolves, as related by Barry Lopez, is much more detailed than ours, it is not complete; for Nunamiuts there is no single ultimate wolf reality, which is "not a thing to be anxious over." Thus the Eskimo's knowledge of wolves tends to be open-ended, having to do with variation and possibility rather than certainty, particularity rather than universality. Eskimos speak more often of individual wolves than of a collective "wolf":

> *Amaguk* [Wolf] may be a wolf with a family who hunts with more determination than a yearling wolf who has no family to feed. He may be an old wolf alone on the tundra, tossing a piece of caribou hide up in the air and running to catch it. He may be an ill-tempered wolf who always tries to kill trespassing wolves wandering in his territory. Or he may be a wolf who toys with a red-backed mouse in the morning and kills a moose in the afternoon.

Native Americans in general did not traditionally consider themselves apart from nature in the way we do; but that does not mean they refused to perceive difference. To perceive difference was not to constitute hierarchy. Just as there were "the People," so too were there "the Bears," "the Mice," and so forth. Animals were simply separate nations, each with particular qualities from which one could learn by paying respectful attention.

In contrast, given our entrenched ideologies, it is hard for us simply to *see* both similarity and differences without rushing to rankings and dualistic categories. The hold of conventional categories is so extraordinary that even Peter Singer and Tom Regan, two of the English-speaking scholars most visibly committed to animal rights advocacy, have argued wholly by reference to Western structures of analytic rationality—Benthamite utilitarianism and deontological libertarianism—as if a new formulation of cost-benefit analysis or a new clarification of Kantian membership criteria will solve what is ultimately a problem in the very nature of our perception. Perhaps for that reason it has been noted that the animal rights movement, with its individualistic emphasis, may be irrelevant, or counter to, a sound environmental ethics.

A first step toward formulating a more sensitive (even sensible) ethics must be, instead, a recovery of humility. We must disabuse ourselves of the cultural version of what Stephen Hawking has called the "strong anthropic principle"—the notion that we are so special that everything else must have assembled itself for the sake of producing us. In the case of other human cultures, our presumption has led to the obliteration of their difference. In 1938, when outsiders had their "first contact" with the fifty thousand previously unknown Papuans of western New Guinea, they discovered literally hundreds of separate cultures, each with its own language. Today anthropologists know of virtually no other human culture, anywhere on earth, that has been untouched by the industrialized West. The point here is not to romanticize any particular lost culture—some practiced self-mutilation, others cannibalism, others child abuse—but rather to recall that the dominant cultures triumphed in their evolutionary short-run for economic and military reasons, hardly qualities that readily correlate with virtue, happiness,

or even long-term human survival.

As we suppress difference, we are forced to rely solely on our own culturally contingent mode of perception for access to understanding. The same process of self-celebration that has led to our quashing otherness in human cultures lies at the heart of our reduction of nonhuman reality to the status of "thing," to the point where we can no longer even perceive, much less respect, the diversity around us. Given that disrespect, it is hardly surprising that we tolerate the obliteration of a hundred species a day in the rain forests alone. In the service of prideful domination, we have deployed our colonial universals to destroy both the legitimacy and the very reality of difference.

The move toward humility, however, which comes with a renewed appreciation of difference, does not imply that we can solve ethical problems simply by recourse to some essentialist conception of "the natural." This tempting ploy has characterized approaches as diverse as the medieval Scholastic's quest for natural law and the modern sentimentalist's seeking of truth through naturalistic "feel-good" spirituality, the latter approach based on not much more than grooving on selectively chosen experiences of nature at its most pleasurable. In its extraordinary richness of particularity, nature itself yields no morality. Defying the once-common efforts of the pious to find homiletic lessons in every detail of natural life, the world has, as modern theology states, "come of age" in secular times, which may be science's greatest gift to faith. Out there, beyond our limited perceptual capacities, nature is what it is—unrelentingly objective, and unbounded and unexplained by our human moral preoccupations.

To emphasize perceptual distance is not to suggest that we stand uniquely *outside of nature,* but, rather, to remind ourselves that we are bound by what Hawking has called the "weak anthropic" principle—that "we see the universe the way it is because we exist." We are animals who regularly mythologize the finitude of mortality, who seek God and try to discover in our dialectical engagement with the universe the meaning of our own compassion. As such, we can neither abdicate responsibility nor return to the hubristic illusion that we can fashion a unitive, transnatural morality. God sends us back to the world as it is (however provisional its reality), and to us as we are.

We can therefore offer little solace to those who demand prescriptive norms. We cannot tell you, for example, that you must be vegetarians, that all animal experimentation must cease, or even that we followed the path of moral correctness with respect to Bruno, who, finally, met with good fortune. (A teenage friend took Bruno to live with him when he left home to go to college. Bruno now resides in the country; and we have told our small children that Bruno went away to college.) There is, to be sure, a trendy tendency to fashion environmentally appropriate ethical norms and systems by taking a largely preconceived agenda (for example, nature preservation or vegetarianism) and shoring it up with an eclectic appeal, in the manner of legal argument, to various bits of Scripture, "Eastern" religion, Native American legend, philosophy, and congenial scientific data. It is as if, faced with the environmental disaster we have created, we now seek the comfortable assurance that God is, after all, a committed environmentalist. We forget that God cannot be confined by our human need for an ally. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The only God who can help us is the one who cannot help."

To reject this trendy eclecticism is not to suggest that we wallow in relativism, but to urge that we must recover a more serious theological process, one rooted in context. The recovery of context is thus a part of the true agenda of "postmodernism"—a theological agenda rather than a decadent self-indulgent aesthetic affectation. Just as conventional religion was compelled to confront the seeming triumph of scientific, positivistic secularism to the point of virtually conceding the "death of God," so too the perceptual changes wrought by the collapse of that secular worldview demand a theological response. This is to suggest neither a misguided "fundamentalism" that tries to recover a prescientific mode of being nor a retreat to a premodern romanticized view of nature. We need a theological practice that is contextual, dynamic, and just as responsive to the fall of secularism as it was to its rise.

As Jews, we will surely wish to reflect, for example, on the humbling unity of living creatures who are, after all, *kol basar* (all flesh), each infused with *ruakh khayyim* (spirit of life). Why did God promise us a covenant (*berit*) with "the beasts of the field and with the fowls of heaven and with the creeping things of the ground"? (Hosea 2: 20.) As Christians, we may wonder why it is that Christ, rejecting all preconception, appears where least anticipated; He is present in the least among us, the most marginalized, the "stranger" and the "other," always in their unexpected, irreducible particularity. What then is the meaning of the injunction to "love thy neighbor"?

To speak in such starkly sectarian terms is to affirm the necessarily pluralistic character of the modern theological agenda. We cannot leap to essentialist universals about "life" that deny and mask the rich particularity of living experience and of human tradition. Nor can we retreat into defensive sectarian insularity. As we allow ourselves to confront the particularities of penguins and wolves, grasshoppers and crows, we may discover the basis for a postmodern pluralism, not of nihilistic despair, but of transformative renewal. □